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There's Hope In Prison, CBS Shows

By HARRIET VAN HORNE

OF ALL THE HEART-STABBING words in the language, none have so fine a cutting edge as such summations of the human condition as "incurable," "hopeless" or "beyond redemption."

To such bitter-end words the normal reaction is the angry cry, "no, no!" In the healthy individual there is always a need to deny the negative, to surmount the insurmountable. But one voice saying nay to the inevitable is futile and pathetic. It takes a chorus of voices, an organization united by common needs, to turn the nay to an everlasting yea.

Harriet Van Horne

The CBS program, "Twentieth Century," yesterday examined a highly controversial organization whose purpose is to revive hope in the hopeless. We watched that rugged self-help institution, Synanon, in one of its least known activities. That is, working with crime addicts rather than drug addicts.

"Synanon in Prison," while superficial and wildly disorganized, was nevertheless a deeply touching half hour. One tuned out this half hour persuaded that nobody, while his mind can function, is either hopeless or incorrigible.

The Synanon project in Nevada State Prison, where this show was filmed, involves 100 of the 450 inmates. These 100 are an elite group, segregated from other prisoners in special open tiers. There are no guards, no restrictions. Instead of pin-up girls on the bulletin boards there are clippings of a philosophical and religious nature. There is only one firm rule: no violence. And we had the warden's word that the system works. ("We don't have the fights . . . the gripes and complaints," said he.)

Viewers were permitted to eavesdrop on a number of Synanon sessions. Walter Cronkite was accurate in describing these gatherings as "emotional battlefields." Under attack was each man's destructive behavior and self-delusions.

Prime mover of this aspect of Synanon (a word coined by a fuddled addict trying to pronounce seminar) is a one-time petty crook and drug user named Candy Latson. Candy is 29, tough, cool and compassionate only in his adherence to the theory of self-help through self-knowledge. Essentially, Latson is a psychotherapist but without academic degrees or clinical training. Bizarre as it seems, to the conventional eye, Synanon has a good record.

Asked how he persuaded prison inmates to talk, to express their feelings of rage and hurt, Latson had a blunt, no-nonsense answer.

"Most guys in prison, they got an image," he said. "They talk about things that represent status in the criminal world. That is, who pulled the biggest score, what happened that you got busted. You know, the getaway car that wasn't fast enough or Lefty didn't turn at the right corner."

Latson admitted to some 30 arrests in his lifetime. "They know me and I know them," he said. "I got a seventh grade education. My Os are not rounded. . . . Some of the little games they try to get over on me, you know, I've been in some of them. I used to try to put them over on my grandfather who was a minister. . . . This is like hearing myself all over again."

Since joining Synanon six years ago Latson has avoided crime and he hasn't had to much as an aspirin. His reform pattern echoes that of Chuck Dederich, onetime alcoholic who founded Synanon. Dederich expressed the view that many people who are hired to find answers to social problems "feed and fatten on the problem rather than the solution."

The Synanon sessions witnessed by the camera were loud, stormy affairs. The patois of prison could only fascinate the home viewer. "All right, if you like to go around calling yourself a psychopath . . ." was one memorable line. And where else would one hear reminiscences beginning, "Remember Joe back in maximum security?"

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